



Women Working to Support Women in the Welfare Sphere: Psychosocial Challenges

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS (DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS) FROM ONLINE SURVEY OF ORGANISATIONS

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Preliminary findings (descriptive statistics) from online survey of organisations

As part of the Nuffield-funded research project *Women working to support women in the welfare sphere: psychosocial challenges (WWSWWS)*, a survey was administered using the online platform Qualtrics. The survey was targeted at manager/supervisors within organisations that provide support or services to marginalised or socially isolated women and girls. Within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the survey was guided by the project objectives and aimed to determine how combinations of organisational challenge in service provision and increased or modified client need interact to change service demand and delivery. It aimed to document the impact of increased individual, organisational and structural challenges on the personal welfare of women workers and on the efficacy of service delivery within the organisations. It also aimed to identify any changes viewed as positive for organisations and/or their staff, resulting in better or more effective ways of working and practices which support worker welfare.

This brief report outlines the preliminary findings from the online survey using the descriptive statistics auto-generated by Qualtrics. This offers a simple first stage representation of the quantitative data and is not suitable for drawing conclusions. More sophisticated inferential statistical analysis of the quantitative data will follow, along with in-depth analysis of the rich qualitative data gathered as part of the online survey.

Survey design and implementation

The online survey was designed to collect qualitative and quantitative data, guided by the objectives outlined above. The desk-based review phase of the WWSWWS project identified 980 organisations that currently work with marginalised or socially excluded women and girls, and this review guided purposive sampling of organisations. It was primarily directed at managers/supervisors in order to chart and gain a deeper understanding of pandemic-related changes to service demand, adjustments to models of working and service delivery, changes to staffing capacity, resource constraints and other organisational challenges and changes over time. The survey also sought to determine how organisations recognise and respond to risk for individual employees, including any changes to support staff welfare. Finally, the survey provided an

opportunity to document changes that may be positive for organisations and/or their staff, resulting in better or more effective ways of working or mechanisms of support.

The survey was created and administered using the online platform Qualtrics. It contained a mix of closed, multiple choice and open questions. The survey was piloted by members of the project advisory group (PAG) prior to launch and the research team is very grateful to these PAG members for their feedback. Surveys were completed anonymously. Respondents were asked to provide email addresses if they were willing to be contacted for possible follow-up interview, but these were manually separated from survey responses prior to analysis to ensure anonymity.

The survey was opened for responses on January 28th, 2022. Initial invitations to participate were sent by email to the organisations identified during the desk-based review. It is worth noting that many of these email addresses were generic 'contact' or 'info' inboxes and the emails contained anonymous, non-trackable invite links, so it was not possible to track how many of these invites were actually received by staff within the organisation. Reminder emails were sent to the same contact list on five occasions throughout February and early March. Anonymous survey links were also shared via the project website and project Twitter account.

A provisional deadline for responses was set for 7th March 2022, however this was later extended to allow time for partial responses to be completed. No new responses were received after March 18th, and the survey was closed on March 28th. On this date there were a total of 153 survey responses.

About the respondents

Over 99% of respondents self-identified as female. More than two-thirds described their role either as organisational lead, manager, or supervisor. Eight per cent described themselves as team leaders, and 15 per cent said their role included front-line service delivery. The remaining 10 per cent described their role as 'other' with an option to specify, but an overview analysis of these responses suggests many of them could be placed within one of the broader categories. For example, some stated that they were the manager of a specific service within an organisation; others said they were primarily involved in service delivery with some team leader responsibilities, meaning their role straddled more than one category.

About the organisations

32 per cent of respondents said their organisation works at a national level, either UK-wide or nationally within Scotland, England, Wales or Northern Ireland. The rest of the organisations work at a regional or local level. Analysis of the free-text component of this question will reveal greater detail about the geographic distribution of the organisations. The majority of respondents (88 per cent) said they worked for a charitable organisation. Other organisation types represented include social enterprise or community interest companies (six per cent), public sector organisations (two per cent) and community organisations or groups (two per cent).

Respondents were presented with a multiple-choice question asking them to select all the services or types of support their organisation provides (see Figure 1). Support and services included advocacy (108), therapeutic services (95), educational services (71), community work and learning (66), poverty alleviation (53), mentoring (44), digital inclusion (35), legal advice (30), criminal justice services (28), community-based supervision (16), and other (44). Prior to the Covid-19 lockdown these services were provided in a number of different ways, including individual case work (131), group work (124), outreach services (112), drop-in surgeries (86), and crisis support/helplines (66).

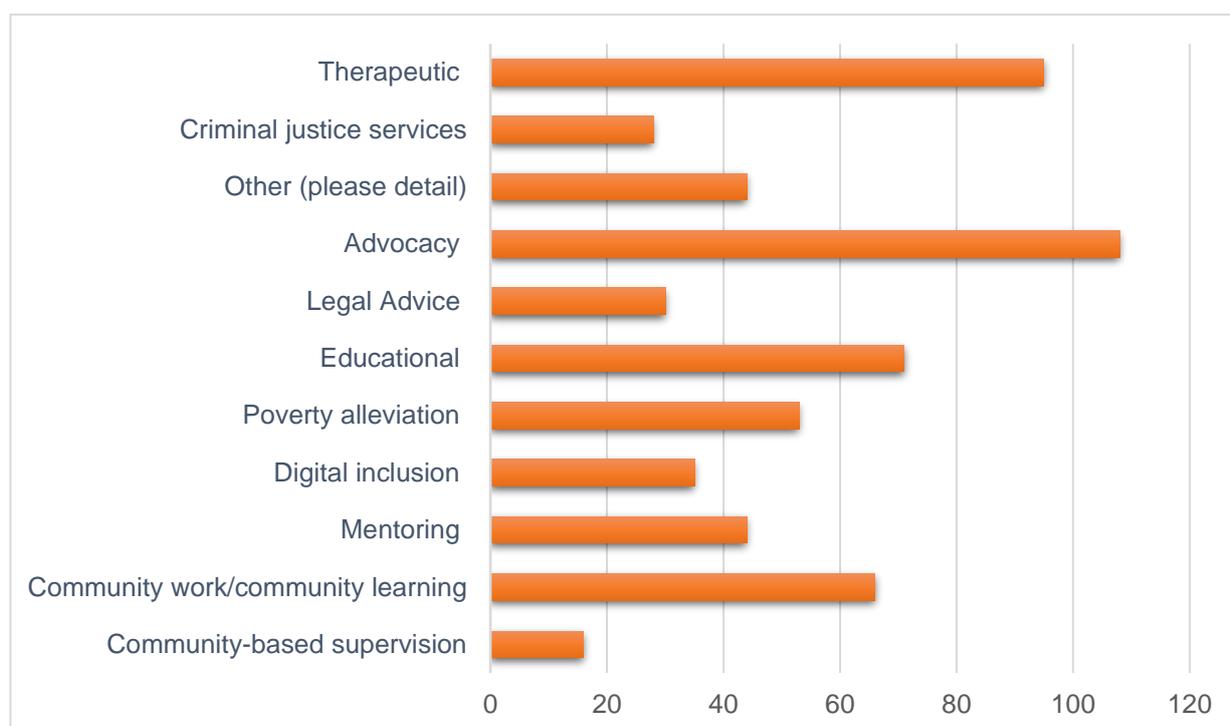


Figure 1. Nature of services

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

The findings suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions have had a significant impact on organisations that deliver services to marginalised women and girls.

More than 80 per cent of respondents reported that demand for services delivered by their organisation had increased since the pandemic began: 52 per cent described this increase as significant. Less than five percent of respondents reported a decrease in service demand. In addition, more than 76 per cent stated that the pandemic had affected their organisation's ability to meet some or all of its planned work and objectives.

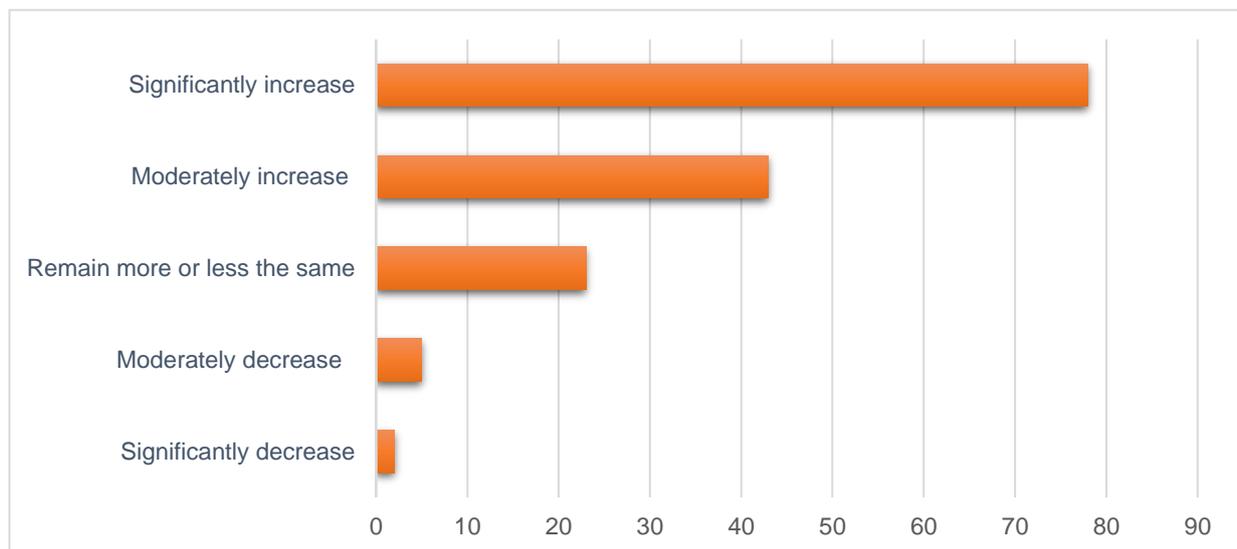


Figure 2. Changes to service demand since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic

With regards to funding, 36 per cent of respondents said funding to their organisation had changed since the pandemic began. 43 per cent reported no change in funding, and 21% said they did not know if funding had changed. Overview analysis of the elaborations to this question suggest many organisations were able to access new or emergency funding to help sustain their activities during the pandemic, while others who ordinarily relied on earned income or donations reported a decrease in available funds.

Responses to the survey seem to suggest that organisations in this sector showed a significant level of adaptability in response to the pandemic (see Figure 3). Most respondents said their organisation had introduced new ways of interacting with service users as a direct result of the pandemic (131). Several organisations had also

introduced additional support services (83) or changed the type of services they provide (100). A smaller number (28) said they had reduced the support services they offer. In terms of time spent working directly with service users, it appears some organisations were able to increase direct interaction (42) while others reduced direct contact (58). This could potentially be explained by the variety of services offered by these organisations and their ability to adapt these services towards remote or socially distanced ways of working.

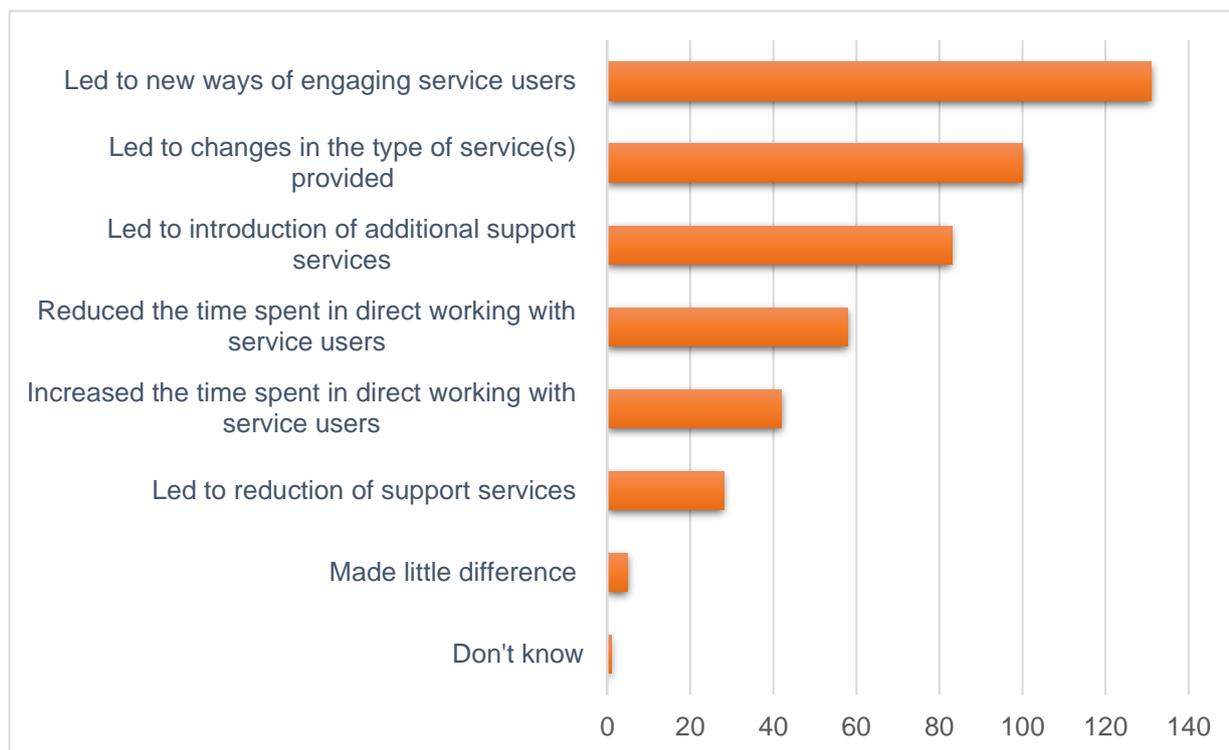


Figure 3. Impact of lockdown measures and restrictions on service delivery and work with service users

As may be expected, most organisations transitioned to home or remote working as a result of the pandemic (129). Most also moved towards digital communication and online/telephone service provision. Just under a third of all respondents said their organisations had changed working patterns for staff or introduced shift systems. Many organisations had expanded into new areas of service provision since the pandemic began (50), while a small number (6) had contracted to focus on a reduced number of services. 84 per cent of respondents said that some or all the changes made to service delivery by their organisation in response to the pandemic had now been made permanent. Overview analysis of the free text component of this question suggests the transition to home, remote, or flexible working and an increased emphasis on online service delivery are the main changes which has been adopted permanently.

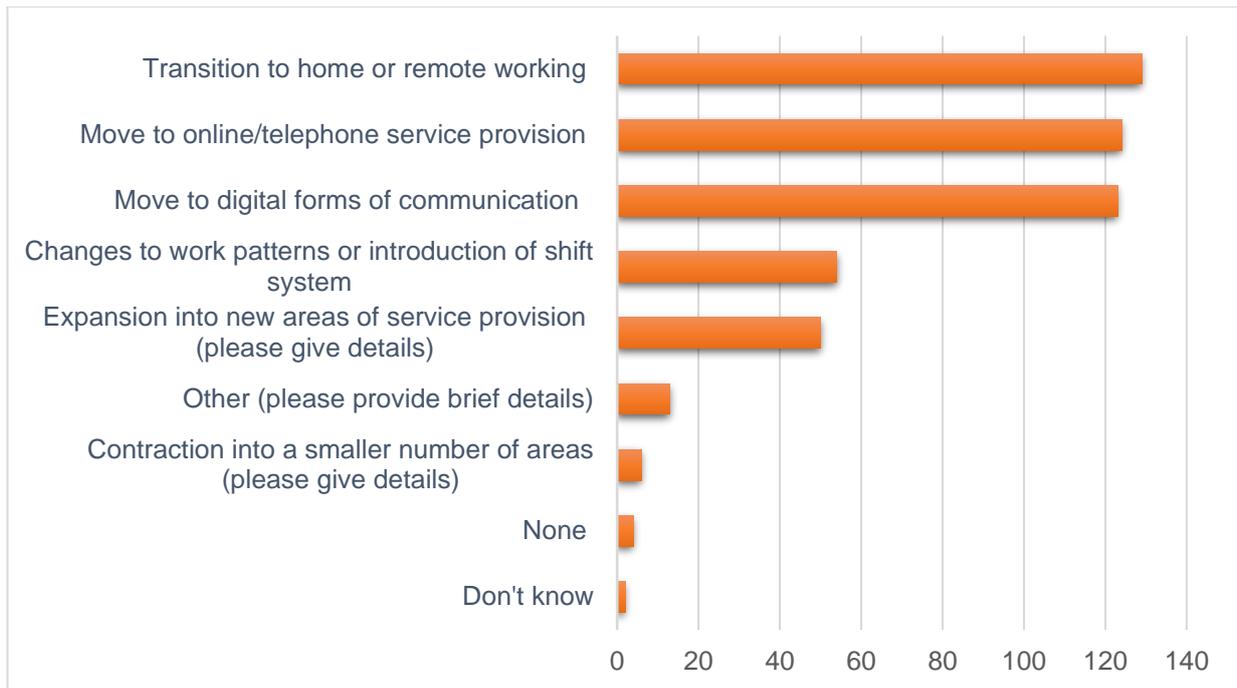


Figure 4. Changes and adjustments to the organisation as a result of Covid-19.

Responses to the survey suggest a mixed picture in terms of changes to staffing within organisations. Just under half of all respondents (77) reported that their organisation had hired new staff or volunteers since the pandemic began, while a significant number had consciously reduced or experienced a reduction in volunteer numbers. Some organisations placed staff on furlough (36) or redeployed existing staff into different roles (30). A small number had frozen recruitment (12) or made staff redundant (9). A significant number (34) reported no changes to staffing.



Figure 5. Staffing changes during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Staff wellbeing

Respondents were asked to characterise the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the day to day working lives of staff within their organisation. 57 per cent described the impact as negative, while a further nine per cent described it as very negative. 13 per cent said there had been no noticeable impact, and 21 per cent described the impact as positive. This could be related to a number of the positive changes and innovative practices explored below.

Respondents were also asked to assess the impact of the pandemic on staff wellbeing. 67 per cent described the impact as negative, with a further 10 per cent classifying it as highly negative. 13 per cent said there was no impact, and another 10 per cent described a positive impact.

The survey suggests that before the onset of Covid-19, managers/supervisors within the organisations already had significant concerns about a number of work-related factors which could be affecting the wellbeing of their staff. Almost all of these concerns have increased since the pandemic began. Prior to the pandemic the main concerns related to pressure due to high levels of service demand and workloads that were considered too high/unmanageable. The number of respondents selecting these as concerns since the pandemic began increased by 75 per cent and 76 per cent respectively. Balancing work with childcare or other caring responsibilities was already a concern for almost a quarter of respondents prior to the pandemic and appears to have increased significantly, with 55 per cent of respondents listing it as a concern since the pandemic began. Concerns which increased most significantly since the pandemic began related to high levels of staff sickness/absence (444 per cent increase) and increased workloads due to staff illness/isolation/absence (340 per cent increase). There was also a significant increase in concerns for the safety of staff when working with service users (170 per cent increase), presumably due, in part, to the increased risk of contracting Covid-19. Other pre-existing concerns which also increased during the pandemic, but from lower base levels than the other factors, included high staff turnover (112 per cent increase), limited training opportunities (135 per cent increase), lone working (36 per cent increase); and lack of job security (18 per cent increase). Concerns about a lack of opportunity for staff progression remained stable.

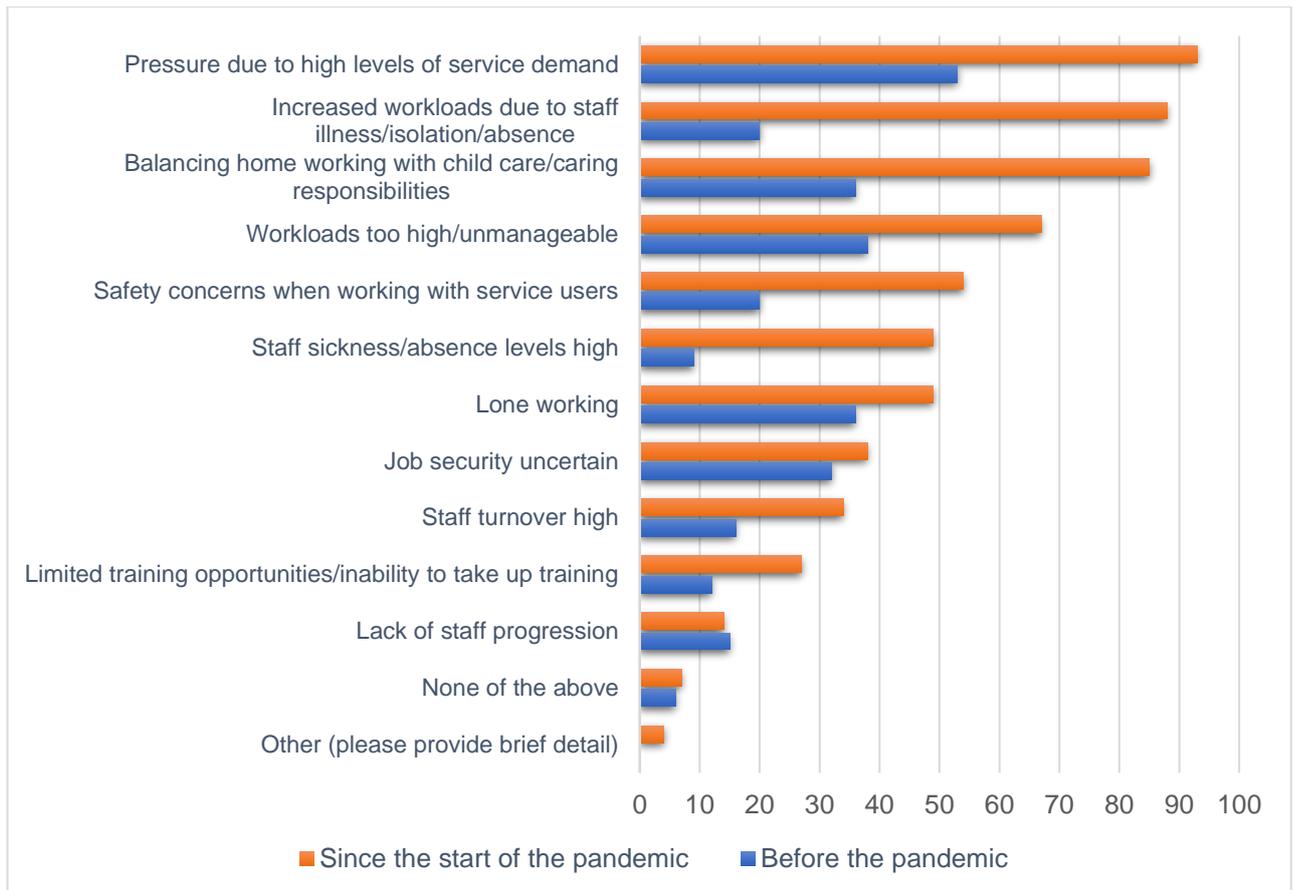


Figure 6. Work-related and staff wellbeing concerns before and since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic

Each of the following factors were chosen by more than 50 per cent of respondents as being a challenge experienced by staff within their organisation since the pandemic began:

- heightened concerns for service users
- reduced contact with colleagues and supervisors
- increased isolation and loneliness
- home working
- poorer mental health and wellbeing
- child care and caring responsibilities
- online/digital working (e.g. lack of technical knowledge/support/other barriers)

Other challenges described by smaller numbers of respondents included the loss of neutral spaces to work with service users, restriction of movement, increased economic hardship, and poorer physical health.

Positive changes and innovative practices

While it is clear that the Covid-19 pandemic had negative effects on organisations and staff within this sector, it was interesting that 75 per cent of respondents stated that the pandemic had led to changes they would consider to be positive for their organisation and staff working within in the organisation (see figure 7). For example, improved flexibility in working patterns/hours was viewed as positive by over 61 per cent of respondents. Over 43 per cent of those surveyed said their funders were receptive to meeting organisational needs, and over one third said their organisation had seen improvements in uptake for their services since the pandemic began. Other positive changes to ways of working included new partnerships, streamlining of bureaucracies, and additional staffing resources. Analysis of free text responses will reveal greater detail about these factors and other changes viewed as positive.

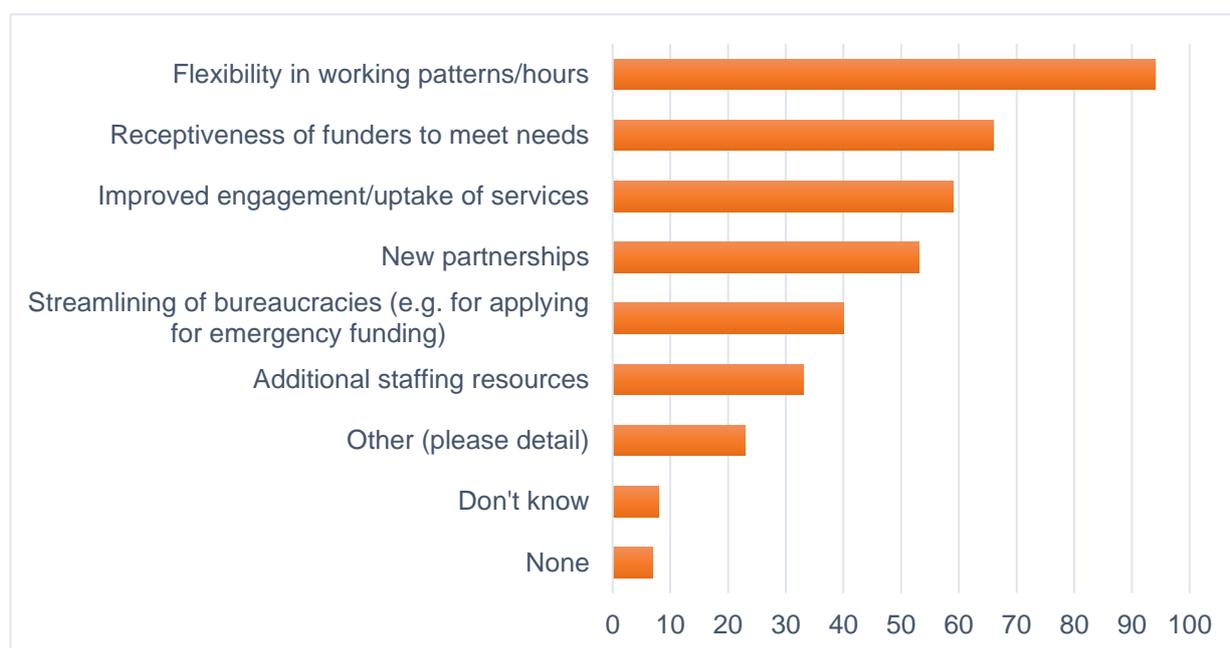


Figure 7. Positive changes since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic

57 per cent of respondents said their organisation had introduced new initiatives or processes aimed at improving staff wellbeing as a result of the pandemic. The survey suggests organisations were already taking a number of different steps to identify or

reduce workplace stress prior to the pandemic, which have shifted slightly since the pandemic began. Informal support by managers/supervisors was the most utilised method prior to the pandemic and this remains the case. There has been a slight decrease in structured supervision and mentoring and flexible face-to-face support, contrasted with an increase in reasonable adjustments to working patterns and increased use of relaxation or physical activities. Provision of mental health information and access to external sources of support also increased, as did the use of risk assessments and stress audits.

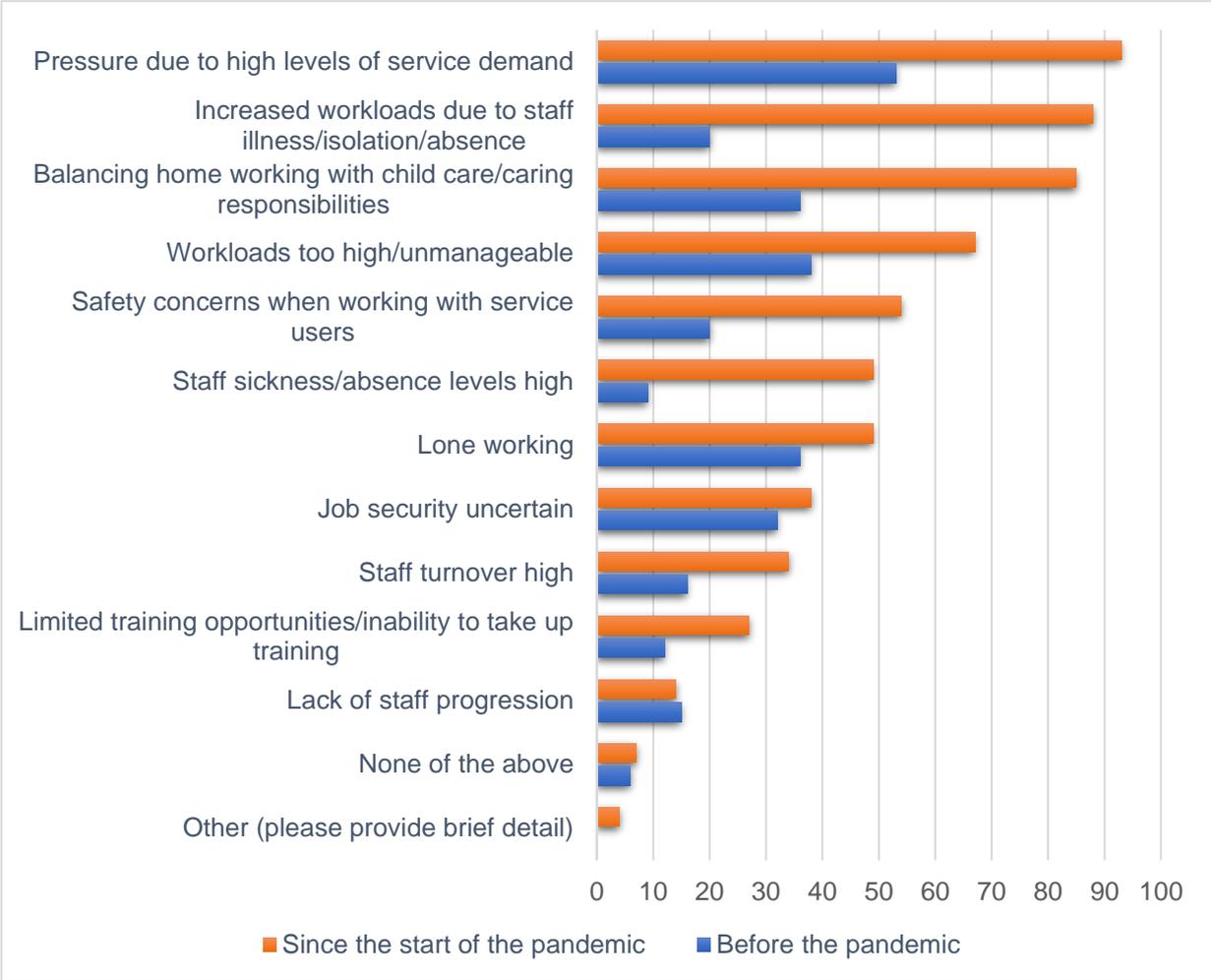


Figure 8. Innovative practices before and after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic

Future of the organisations

The final section of the survey asked respondents to think about the future of their organisation and any challenges it may face. Perhaps unsurprisingly, funding and the medium to long term sustainability of the organisation were highlighted as key challenges. More than a quarter of respondents also highlighted staff retention, lack of

government support, and environmental workplace changes (such as the transition to hybrid/remote working) as challenges. 20 per cent also felt that competition from other organisations within the sector may be a challenge.

Encouragingly, 97 per cent of respondents believed their organisation would still be operational in 12 months time. The remaining three per cent said they did not know. It is worth noting here that some of those who responded to the survey may not have access to the financial or other information that would allow them to make an assessment of future viability.

Next steps

The next phase of the analysis of the survey findings will focus on: a) the use of inferential statistical analysis of the quantitative data, and; b) a thematic analysis of the qualitative, free text data gathered within the online survey.